



ORGANIC COTTON ACCELERATOR

# OCA Decent Work Strategy 2024-2030

Better Incomes, Conditions,  
and Protection for  
Organic Cotton Communities



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# Introduction

Decent work is core to the philosophy of organic farming and to OCA's objectives. It is essential to OCA's mission to unite the sector and unlock the potential of organic cotton, driving positive change for both people and the planet.

Since its inception, OCA has been committed to supporting farmers engaged in organic cotton production by ensuring a secure market and higher prices for their fibre and creating the conditions for economic improvement at the farm level.

Through partnerships with global brands, OCA has increased the uptake of organic cotton, raised prices for farmers, and improved farming practices. Improving smallholder farmers' incomes has been a key first step toward better livelihoods and working conditions for the more than 100,000 (mostly smallholder) farmers that OCA supports.

However, OCA aims to go beyond income improvement alone. We believe that all actors in a sustainable supply chain – especially farming communities – should be empowered to access their rights and decent working conditions. With the support of our Implementing Partners, we aspire to use our unique position in the organic cotton sector to drive positive impact in working conditions at the organic cotton farms in our network.

The challenge is significant and organic agriculture standards typically do not address decent work or social criteria specifically. Farmers, particularly smallholders and farm workers, are among the most vulnerable groups, with limited access to fair work conditions. Despite international conventions and efforts by governments and organisations, decent work is still not a reality for many in these farming communities.

In this strategy, we outline how we will address these issues in collaboration with our partners, aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 8 - Decent Work and Economic Growth. Over the next seven years, OCA will work to improve working conditions and protections by addressing living income and wages; eliminating unlawful child labour, and bonded and forced labour; helping to improve health and safety on OCA farms; ending discriminatory practices; and providing access to social protection and worker representation.

The systemic nature of these challenges requires a balance between ambition and realism, along with clarity around OCA's role and contribution. Our focus will be on strengthening our Farm Programme, upweighting our monitoring and evaluation systems, sharing learnings, and promoting best practices.

Achieving lasting impact requires collaboration at every level. OCA is committed to working closely with all actors in the cotton value chain to improve incomes and working conditions, while empowering farmers and farm workers to access their rights.

The  
International Labour  
Organisation (ILO)  
defines decent work as  
“productive work for women  
and men in conditions of  
freedom, equity, security and  
human dignity”





# OCA's Decent Work Aims

Through research and consultation with stakeholders, OCA has identified seven core pillars of decent work that are applicable to cotton farming. These pillars, inspired by ILO's Decent Work Agenda, will guide our future interventions.

Field-level plans and targets will be tailored to address the most pressing risks and challenges in each location. In pursuing these aims, OCA's role is to promote and enable improvement, focusing on corrective actions rather than sanctions for non-compliance.



## 1. Living income and wages

Employment in cotton farming is diverse and fluid, including self-employment, waged labour, and family or community labour. The labour force consists of a combination of local and migrant workers, seasonal workers, and daily wage labourers. Waged workers in cotton farming are not a homogeneous group of people. The distinction between farmer and worker may also be blurred, as many small farmers also work regularly for other farmers to supplement their income.

Low crop yields and costly farming practices, without access to credit or social security, can trap smallholder farmers in poverty and debt, compromising their human rights. Similarly, low wages and lack of social safety nets increase the socio-economic vulnerability of cotton farm labourers and their families, exposing them to hazardous working conditions and forced labour. Climate change further exacerbates yield unpredictability, while high-interest loans add additional pressure on already strained incomes.



OCA will work with partners to ensure timely payments, improve financial literacy, and close the gap between actual earnings and the proposed living incomes and wages in each region where it operates. Higher net incomes for farmers and premium payments are central to OCA's 2030 strategy. Lasting improvements require that farmers have the skills, resources and support to make necessary changes for themselves and those who depend on them.





## 2. No unlawful child or adolescent labour

Child and adolescent labour can have detrimental impacts on education and health, and are both a cause and consequence of poverty, hunger, unsafe migration and overall lack of access to decent work. Many of these children are school dropouts from marginalised communities, making them particularly vulnerable. Cotton farming is hard work and often non-mechanized.

While children may engage in unpaid family work for tasks like manual harvesting, weeding, and crop protection, this is subject to national and local laws on age, education, and work type. Such involvement can transmit generational knowledge and skills. However, children employed on larger farms can face long hours and are vulnerable to exhaustion, violence, and abuse.



Farmers participating in the OCA Farm Programme must provide proof of age for any young worker on their farms and commit to not unlawfully employ children or adolescents in hazardous work or restrict their basic rights to education, in accordance with local laws. OCA's policies and practices will adhere to local legal definitions concerning children and adolescents. Beyond its commitment to protecting children from hazardous labour, OCA will collaborate with local agencies to ensure children have access to education.



## 3. No forced or bonded labour

Forced labour involves compelling individuals to work against their will through threats of punishment, manipulated debt, violence, deception, or even abuse of legal processes. Debt bondage or bonded labour is an abuse analogous to slavery, in which individuals are pledged to work either for a money lender or a landlord to repay a debt.

Vulnerable groups, including historically oppressed castes, religious minorities, migrants, women and children, particularly from low-income families, are susceptible to such exploitation. Women and children in forced labour are also highly vulnerable to being sexually exploited.



Forced or bonded labour will not be tolerated in farms participating in the OCA Farm Programme. OCA will require farmers to recognise that non-voluntary overtime work (amounting to more than eight hours of regular work) is a form of forced labour and to ensure that no workers are compelled to work extra hours.





## 4. Adhere to national occupational health and safety (OHS) regulations

According to ILO, agriculture is one of the most hazardous occupations. Major health and safety concerns include limited access to clean water and sanitation, exposure to chemicals and pesticides, heat stress, long working hours, and accidents. These risks can lead to injuries, long-term physical impairments, sickness and even death, especially with limited access to medical care and poor living and working conditions.



Organic farming reduces exposure to harmful chemicals, a significant risk in conventional cotton production, although this requires consistent monitoring to ensure compliance.

OCA will prioritise making early, concrete improvements to address basic physical needs. Common challenges include occupational health and safety, as well as access to essential amenities like water, sanitation, rest areas, and shade. OCA will support farmers in improving occupational health and safety measures for all workers, including family members, hired and migrant workers, with a focus on emergency provisions.



## 5. End discriminatory practices

Globally, women represent less than 15% of landowners in rural communities, and the land they own is often smaller and of lower quality than that owned by men, according to the World Food Programme. Gender discrimination remains a significant challenge in cotton production, partly driven by pre-existing social attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Women farmers typically have limited involvement in decision-making, lack access to market-facing roles, and have little control over land, productive resources, or profits. They also face reduced access to agricultural extension services and opportunities to build agronomic, business, negotiation, and communication skills.

Inequality and discrimination also lead to unequal treatment and increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. The form of discrimination varies by growing region but includes geographic origin, gender, race, caste, religion or belonging to a minority group.



OCA will collaborate with partners and farmers to end discriminatory practices, with a focus on gender equality. Women often face discrimination in access to health and hygiene facilities, including water, sanitation, and rest areas. OCA will also focus on the gender pay gap by ensuring equal pay for equal work and increasing women's access to training and financial literacy. Where needed, other forms of discrimination, such as those based on origin, age, or family background, will also be tackled.





## 6. Access to social protection

Agricultural households largely operate within the informal sector, making social protection systems a critical safety net to address low and unstable incomes, precarious working conditions, and health and safety risks. This is also the case for many organic cotton farmers and farm workers, who tend to lack access to healthcare and social security schemes (including sickness pay), basic education, childcare, and the ability to organise or raise complaints.

Social protection promotes agricultural growth by reducing farmers' vulnerability to risks, which encourages investment in better practices. As growth improves productivity and incomes, it further reduces vulnerability, creating a positive cycle of resilience and development.



OCA will progressively improve the access to social protections for farmers, farm workers, and their families, as mandated by local laws. In collaboration with Implementing Partners, OCA will identify opportunities such as crop insurance to ensure social protection coverage.



## 7. Worker voice and representation

Social dialogue covers the ways in which representatives of employers, workers and potentially governments exchange information, consult, negotiate and reach agreements on issues that concern them. It constitutes an important pillar of decent work, closely connected with rights such as freedom of association and collective bargaining.

The small scale of organic cotton farming and its informal, unorganised nature, make formal social dialogue less applicable, as it is more relevant to larger farms with employed workers. Nonetheless, there is potential to create channels for farmer and worker voices, as well as grievance mechanisms to address unfair or unreasonable treatment.



OCA will investigate and take appropriate corrective action when issues are raised by farmers or through its partners and third-party validators. Through training and monitoring, OCA and its Implementing Partners will ensure that farmers and farm workers are aware of and able to access government or civil society grievance channels without fear of reprisal.





# OCA's Decent Work Core Strategy

Our Decent Work Strategy is summarised in the graphic below, which sets out the principles which guide decent work policy and summarises the intended impact, aims and interventions for our decent work programme through to 2030.

OCA's impact statement for decent work is aligned with our mission and recognises:

- The importance of addressing decent work issues at the community level.
- The relevance for both smallholder farmers (OCA's focus to date) and larger farms, where employer-employee relationships are more complex.
- Significant differences between the challenges and realities at farm level compared to those encountered at production facilities higher up the supply chain.

Our efforts will focus on five priority actions, fully integrated with our Farm Programme and Contributor platform, and underpinned by five guiding principles. We set these out over the following pages.





## Guiding Principles



Global ambitions,  
local priorities



Farmer centricity



Continuous  
improvement



Confidentiality



Collaborative  
and inclusive

## OCA Mission

Unite the sector to unleash the potential of organic cotton and deliver positive change for people and the planet.

## Impact

Better working conditions and protections for organic cotton farmers, farm workers and their communities.

## Aims



Living incomes  
and wages



No unlawful  
child labour



No forced  
or bonded  
labour



Adhere to  
national  
laws and  
regulations



End discriminatory  
practices



Access  
to social  
protection



Worker voice and  
representation

## Priority Actions



Enable fair and  
transparent payment,  
access to finance and  
financial literacy



Build awareness and  
understanding of decent  
work risks and challenges  
through capacity building  
& dialogue



Generate and share  
actionable data on  
decent work risks and  
improvements on  
OCA farms



Generate funding  
and proof of  
concept for targeted  
improvements and  
remediation



Integrate decent  
work into OCA  
plans, projects and  
governance

# How we will drive change

OCA has developed its global Decent Work Strategy - within the overall framework of OCA's strategic plan - to align with regulators, frameworks and partner organisations which have compatible agendas.

Priorities, targets and interventions will be determined locally in order to focus on the most pressing challenges for the farming communities and our stakeholders in each of the areas where we work.



- ▶ We will build on our track record of generating higher net incomes for farmers, by enabling fair and transparent payment to OCA farmers and farm workers, ensuring that they are promptly and properly paid, improving access to finance and increasing their financial literacy.
- ▶ We will build awareness and understanding of decent work rights and challenges through capacity building and dialogue.
- ▶ We will generate and share data on decent work risks and improvements on OCA farms.
- ▶ Where possible, we will access funding for targeted improvements and remediation with the aim of demonstrating proof of concept for others to take on and expand.
- ▶ OCA's Decent Work Strategy applies to all farms within the OCA Farm Programme, including seasonally associated farmer groups, and both current organic producers and those in-conversion. It includes the farmers, farmworkers (including migrant workers), and their families, considering the broader community context in which they live. Our goal is to contribute to a sector-wide transformation and foster systemic change in agricultural production.
- ▶ Ginning mills and seed production are not included in this strategy. While we acknowledge the need for improvement in these areas, as registered companies they fall outside the scope of our work, being governed by national laws and organic chain of custody standards.

# Priority Actions



## 1. Enable fair and transparent payment, access to finance and financial literacy

OCA manages programmes across multiple countries. In the context of smallholder and tribal farming, significantly improving the economic rewards for smallholder and tribal cotton farmers is crucial to achieving decent living and working conditions. OCA is committed to highlighting this issue and will continue to collaborate with partners to take impactful steps that benefit farmers, farmworkers, and their families, while offering brands and philanthropic organisations tailored solutions.



OCA will improve farmers' understanding of prices, margins, banking, and loans, helping them to do business more effectively and avoid fraud or malpractice. Expanding access to digital payments will ensure timely payment, increase transparency, and reduce reliance on middlemen. We will work towards gradual annual increases in payments to OCA farmers, helping them progress toward achieving a living income and to provide living wages for their workers by 2030.



## 2. Build awareness and understanding of decent work risks and challenges through capacity building and dialogue

Our Implementing Partners will remain OCA's principal interface with farmers and will play a key role in the fulfilment of this strategy. OCA will expand its current training and capacity building to make farmers and farm workers aware of their rights and encourage reflection and discussion around practices such as child labour or gender discrimination.



OCA will ensure that its third-party verifiers (TPVs) are equipped with the necessary tools and capabilities to accurately assess decent work conditions based on ILO indicators, including fair payments and working hours, child labour, bonded/forced labour, occupational health and safety, discrimination in all forms, and access to social protection. As OCA expands its programme to include larger farms, there will be an increased focus on worker voice and representation.



### **3. Generate and share authoritative data on decent work risks and improvements on OCA farms**

OCA's current Monitoring and Evaluation methodologies focus primarily on collecting quantitative data from its projects. Together with additional qualitative information through verbal and reporting channels, we can provide significant insights into decent work, including the risks that farmers and farm workers face within an OCA project.



OCA will use proven methodologies wherever possible. When necessary, we will work with its partners and subject-matter experts to design new approaches to research, monitoring and evaluation approaches that are better suited to address specific and sensitive issues.

OCA's impact monitoring results will be passed through the certified and segregated organic supply chain, allowing brands and retailers to monitor and address specific issues related to decent work on the farms producing their organic cotton fiber.



### **4. Generate funding and proof of concept for targeted improvements and remediation**

Whilst procurement, training, pre-finance, provision of inputs and premium payments for OCA farmers will help address some of the prevalent decent work issues through monitoring, evaluation and education, additional financial support will be required for specific interventions in locations from which OCA's brands and retailers are sourcing.

With a track record in innovations such as its payment premium for organic farmers, OCA is well placed to scope and fundraise for new solutions to specific problems that, once proven, could potentially be scaled by others.



### **5. Integrate decent work into OCA plans, projects and governance**

OCA will embed the key elements of this Decent Work Strategy into all its relevant plans, documentation, and governance, ensuring a holistic approach to improving working conditions.

A strong focus on decent work will be integrated into OCA's overall organisational strategy. Local priorities, targets, and indicators will be agreed upon with our Implementing Partners, to ensure meaningful progress. To support this, OCA will strengthen its internal capacity by developing and hiring the necessary expertise and/or engaging relevant specialist consultancies where needed.





# Guiding principles

OCA's Decent Work Strategy is based on five guiding principles which align closely with the overall OCA 2030 strategy.



## Global ambitions, local priorities

Research consistently demonstrates that the prevalence, severity and solvability of decent work issues varies significantly across the areas where we work. OCA will work with Implementing Partners, brands and retailers, and farmers and farm workers to prioritise specific decent work challenges by location as the basis for setting local targets, indicators and work plans.



## Farmer centricity

In keeping with OCA's farmer-first commitment and building on its unique proximity to farmers, the needs, perceptions and views of OCA farmers and farm workers will be central and paramount in identifying and tackling decent work challenges and solutions.



## Continuous improvement

OCA is not an assurance scheme, and aims for continuous improvement rather than compliance, while striving not to create undue additional complexity and cost for farmers and for its field teams. We recognise that many of the issues we will face are rooted in poverty and deep-seated commercial and social practices and will require time, will and significant resources to ameliorate or remedy.



## Confidentiality

Our stakeholders' confidentiality will be upheld in accordance with local, national and international law and our governance agreement. In keeping with the principle of continuous improvement, findings of specific violations will generally be treated with discretion so that concerned stakeholders can address them, except where local law requires OCA to report or publicise these.



## Collaborative and inclusive

Decent work will require new levels of ground-level collaboration, including dialogue with local stakeholders to address decent work issues, and build trust in the process over time. Recognising that many other organisations are actively engaged in decent work, OCA will always seek to collaborate with others rather than reinvent the wheel.

# Implementation Roadmap

OCA will contribute to improving working conditions and protections in organic cotton farms through a seven-year plan. We set out our key milestones below:

Category	Activity	2024-2025	2025 – 2026	2027 – onwards
<b>Incomes and finance</b>	Develop OCA's digital payment system	Develop digital payment implementation plan	Pilot the Unified Payment Interface (UPI) alongside existing banking options	Over 80% of OCA farmers receive payments digitally
<b>Capacity building</b>	Develop and optimise OCA's Decent Work Training Curriculum	Implement current Decent Work curriculum	Roll out the farmer training package	Develop a monitoring and improvement system, adapted to new expansion countries
	Implement Decent Work training roll out plan	Develop Decent Work local implementation plans	Agree on the Decent Work 3-year implementation plan and renew/revise terms of engagement	Implement and update training tools and materials
	Develop due diligence evaluation and support system for Implementing Partners	Assess Implementing Partners and Third-party validators capacity	Equip Implementing Partners to take community action	Leverage capability of Implementing Partners, Third-party validators, and expert trainers
	Detailed stakeholder mapping and collaboration plan for multi-stakeholder engagement	Map organisations for potential engagement or collaboration	Develop engagement plans by region	Ensure training is rolled out across all regions and accessible to all farmers
<b>Data on risks and improvements</b>	Develop reporting and indicators within OCA's M&E approach	Develop local indicators and reporting format	Set and agree on baseline data with all Implementing Partners	Ongoing progress reporting
	Set up a regional rotation to ongoingly update Risk mapping	Conduct risk mapping in India	Conduct risk mapping in Pakistan and Türkiye	India risk mapping update
<b>Improvements and remediation</b>	Alert system for violations with escalation and mitigation plan	Evaluate and develop linkage to local grievance mechanisms	Ensure ongoing alerts and remediation plans	



## Join Us

As OCA progressively integrates decent work into its programmes, we aim to expand our engagement with a wide range of organisations — internationally, nationally and locally.

Our success depends on the support and collaboration of diverse stakeholders, including our Contributors, institutional and philanthropic donors, public, private, and voluntary organisations, as well as the farming communities in our programme.

Together, we can build a future where decent work is a reality for the farmers and farm workers we support.

**Join OCA Today**



**ORGANIC COTTON ACCELERATOR**

*Uniting the sector to realise the organic cotton effect*

Rokin 102, 1012 KZ Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
organiccottonaccelerator.org  
[secretariat@organiccottonaccelerator.org](mailto:secretariat@organiccottonaccelerator.org)